



Gannets return to Cape St. Mary's

Birds I View

Bill Montevecchi

The feast day of St Joseph on 19 March is heralded by the return of the swallows to castle at Capistrano. St. Patrick might even have a one-up on Joseph in this respect, as the gannets return to the cliffs of Cape St. Mary's on his feast day 2 days earlier, or at least sort of.

On a southerly wind on the 28th of March, 18 gannets flew over Cape St. Mary's. The gannets are returning from wintering areas along the US coast from New York to the Gulf of Mexico

The arrival of the swallows at Capistrano is celebrated with tolling bells, crowds from the world over and a parade. The gannet arrival at Cape St. Mary's is usually witnessed as it was this year by Branch residents and reserve naturalists Tony Power and Chris Mooney.

The first arriving gannets are likely males taking well focused looks at their 50 square centimeter pieces of real estate on Bird Rock. Gannets are spatial geniuses. After traveling many thousands of kilometers during migration, they return to within about 10 centimeters of where they nested the previous year.

This spatial precision of the nesting site is crucial for gannet breeding success. Gannet colonies are very densely packed aggregations, with these extremely aggressive birds nesting but a neck and beak length apart.

The location of the nest-site is critical, because it is where the female returns to find her mate. Each autumn, partners go their separate ways after the youngster has departed for bluer oceans. It is at nest-site in spring that mates meet again, re-uniting and re-affirming their life-time monogamous pair-bond.

So with assurance that spring brings eternal hope, the gannets are back at Cape St. Mary's. St. Patrick's in heaven likely sharing a Guinness with St. Joseph and at present the natural world is going on as it should.

Boat survey at Cape St. Mary's

In late March, Tony Power and crew made a very informative survey of birds in and around the Cape St. Mary's Seabird Ecological Reserve. Highlights included 267 harlequin ducks at the offshore rocks, known as the St. Mary's Cays. This is likely the highest counts of harlequins at the Cape since Les Tuck and Roger Tory Peterson counted 400 in the 1950s!

Including boat and land surveys about 20,000 eiders were counted between Cape St. Mary's and Cape Race. Three hundred Canada geese, 30 red-breasted mergansers and 25 common goldeneye were at North Harbour, and a dozen black scoters were seen at St. Vincents. A snowy owl was seen correctly at Mistaken Point.

Partridge Forever Society opposes ATV destruction of wetlands

The Partridge Forever Society banquet was held on April 2nd at the legion hall in Killigrews. The hunters' expressed a loud and collective concern about irresponsible ATV destruction to the bogs and barrens.

Un-enforced environmental laws to restrict ATV use in wetlands may actually be more harmful than no laws at all. The wanton ignorance and violation of the laws seem to imply that wetland destruction is condoned by both citizens and government. Increased awareness of the damage being done is essential for effective conservation.

Charlene Johnson, the Minister of Environment and Conservation, attended and spoke at the banquet. There is almost always a minister at the society meetings but the ATVs just keep tearing through the bogs.

With the precarious state of ptarmigan and caribou in the province, more public attention and concern needs to be aimed at stopping the habitat

destruction being inflicted by irresponsible ATV drivers. The society is planning to increase their efforts in this respect. Stay tuned.

Birds in area and around the province

The ducks, including the stunning male wood duck and a pair of northern pintails, are back at the open water in Mitchells Pond near Old Broad Cove Road (Linda Somerton). It is time for the town council to put back up the helpful duck-crossing signs that they have had there in the past.

A few black ducks are also in Neary's Pond and Beachy Cove Pond and in Portugal Cove Harbour (Janet, Marina and Al Montevecchi). Two male and 3 female red-breasted mergansers were diving near the wharf in Portugal Cove in late March. Cormorants are in the harbour also (Kathryn Welbourne). A female hooded merganser is still at Quidi Vidi Lake with the scaup and tufted ducks (Marlene Creates). Tufted ducks are also at Burton's Pond.

About 1200 eiders are a welcome sight in Broad Cove in Conception Bay North (Wanda Crocker). In early April, Ken Hannaford reported 4,000 – 5,000 eiders at Cape Spear, and Gene Hezberg saw a similarly large eider raft from Signal Hill.

The black-headed gulls are acquiring their black caps and the black guillemots their elegant black plumage in hormonal anticipation of the upcoming breeding season.

Sharp-shinned hawks have been seen in Portugal Cove and Paradise (Janet Montevecchi, Dot Penney). Gord Ralph brought me a photo of a short-eared owl specimen with a fractured skull that appeared to end its days in a window collisions in Winter Brook, Bonavista Bay.

Gulls are the meal of the day for the five or more bald eagles dining at Quidi Vidi Lake (Natalie Lippa). A lone robin that over-wintered feeding on the wilted fruit of an apple tree in Seal Cove (Gerie Young) is being joined by returning compatriots grubbing for life in the uncovered grasses.

A magnificent male flicker caught Colleen Rogers' photographic attention at the Whaleback Convenience in Portugal Cove. In mid-March, a rock dove (pigeon) was reminiscent of an Antarctic snow petrel as it carried nest twigs to a cavern in the snow on a roof on the Science Building at MUN. The pigeons are now incubating a pair of eggs.

An evening grosbeak with conjunctivitis has been at Pam Williams' feeder in St. Philips. Common redpolls are visiting Shonda and Harry Browns' feeders in Southern Harbour. Rarer whiter stubby-beaked hoary

redpolls have come to feeders in St. John's (Gene Herzberg) and Trepassey (Dave Sheppard).

See beyond the snow and ice - it's spring. The day length, the fog and singing birds tells us so. A white-winged crossbill was singing lustily at the top of fir as the sun glistened the snow on the second day of spring. Fox sparrows are back in town and with the ever exuberant juncos are ringing out their testy testosterone tributes from the tree-tops.

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